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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000049

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA FRONT OFFICE AND NEA/ELA; NSC FOR  
ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER

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TAGS: PREL PGOV KDEM LE SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MOUSSA MISSION MISSES MARK; PRESIDENTIAL  
IMPASSE PROLONGED

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) In a 1/12 meeting with the Ambassador, Arab League  
Secretary General Amr Moussa, while relentlessly chipper,

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could not point to a single positive development from his  
shuttle diplomacy among feuding Lebanese politicians. While  
publicly and privately interpreting the Arab League  
communique on Lebanon in ways that leaned toward March 14's  
interpretation in the cabinet formation, he acknowledged that  
March 8-Aoun politicians did not agree: Hizballah's Hassan  
Nasrallah still insists on a blocking third of the cabinet,  
and Michel Aoun wants a 10-10-10 division. Moussa, leaving  
Beirut today (1/12), vowed to return in a few days, in  
advance of the next scheduled presidential round (1/21).  
Next time, he will try to forge a March 8-March 14 meeting,  
either "bilaterally" (clearly Moussa's preference) between  
Saad Hariri and Michel Aoun or a National Dialogue-type  
session for all 14 major political leaders. The Ambassador  
questioned the value of a Hariri-Aoun meeting (an idea so far  
rejected by Hariri himself). Moussa did not rule out  
Hizballah-Aoun street action, should no solution materialize.

Mohamad Chatah, PM Siniora's senior aide, told the  
Ambassador later that Moussa also plans to make a day trip  
from Beirut to Damascus, which Chatah thought sent exactly  
the wrong message about where decisions regarding Lebanon  
should be made. Speaking separately, Minister Marwan Hamadeh  
thought that Moussa's alleged Damascus plans might turn out  
to be useful in revealing just where the blockage to  
presidential elections originates. END SUMMARY.

MOUSSA INTERPRETS COMMUNIQUE  
AS REJECTING BLOCKING THIRD

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¶2. (C) Over breakfast with the Ambassador on 1/12, Arab  
League Secretary General Amr Moussa described his various  
meetings with Lebanese politicians over the past three days  
to discuss the 1/5 Arab League foreign ministers' communique  
on Lebanon. He clarified two points to everyone he met, he  
said. First, the communique was not intended to give March

8-Aoun forces a blocking or toppling minority. Second, until the next parliamentary elections, the Arab League recognizes the existing parliamentary majority as legitimate. The majority should have more cabinet weight than the minority.

¶3. (C) What that means in practice, Moussa said, is that, for a 30-member cabinet set up according to the Arab League communique's formula, the minority should have no more than ten seats and the majority should have no more than half of the seats. Neither side could thus impose decision making on the other. Whether those guidelines mean 15-10-5 or 14-10-6 or 13-10-7 (with the smallest numbers reserved for ministers appointed by the president), that's for the Lebanese to decide, Moussa said, claiming not to have discussed exact numbers.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador asked whether his interlocutors had accepted his interpretation of the communique. While March 14 leaders did, March 8 did not. Berri told him to talk with Aoun. Aoun continued to insist on a 10-10-10 split. During an extended meeting with Moussa on Thursday night, Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah stuck to his guns in

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insisting on a blocking third for the March 8-Aoun opposition. Pressed by the Ambassador, Moussa acknowledged that he "wouldn't say" that he had made progress in convincing March 8-Aoun leaders to go along with his interpretation.

CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUE: WILL BE EASY  
(BUT OTHER ISSUES MAY COME UP, TOO)

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¶5. (C) The Ambassador asked Moussa for his interpretation of the communique's reference to electing Lebanon's president according to Lebanon's constitution. Moussa said that he wasn't worried about the procedural, constitutional dispute: if the cabinet allocations can be solved, then the constitutional issue will "solve itself." The Ambassador asked whether Moussa thought that, even after approval of

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cabinet proportions, Aoun, Nasrallah, and Berri would raise other issues, such as ministerial assignments and determination of the new security and army chiefs, before proceeding with presidential elections. "I wouldn't rule it out," Moussa said. He said that he did not know whether Syria and its allies were in fact trying to prevent Michel Sleiman from becoming president at all.

"POSSIBLE" THAT MARCH 8-AOUN BLOC  
WILL RESORT TO USING THE STREET

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¶6. (C) The Ambassador asked Moussa if, after seeing Nasrallah and Aoun, he thought that the March 8-Aoun threats to go to the street indicated a real danger or were merely political posturing. "It's possible" that they might go to the street, Moussa said. "It seems that they are preparing." But he did not see danger of street violence as imminent but rather something that becomes more likely as time passes and no solution emerges.

SYRIA'S INVOLVEMENT:  
STRONGEST OF LEBANON'S "UNCLES"

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¶7. (C) The Ambassador asked Moussa for his analysis of Syria's role in the current presidential impasse. The Lebanese, Moussa responded, have "many uncles": France, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United States, and so on. Syria is merely the "strongest uncle." Except to acknowledge that Berri and Hizballah are undoubtedly taking Syrian views into consideration when stating their own positions, Moussa would not be drawn out on the subject of Syria. The Ambassador

argued that there is hardly equivalence between Egyptian and U.S. relations with the Lebanese, on the one hand, and what the Syrians are doing through its allies in Lebanon, on the other.

NEXT: TRY FOR MARCH 8-MARCH 14  
(OR AOUN-HARIRI) MEETING

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¶8. (C) As for his plans, Moussa noted that he planned to leave Beirut today (1/12) and would "consult with the other Arabs." He would come back, with the intention of staying four or five days, in advance of the next presidential electoral session scheduled for 1/21. During that trip, he wanted to try to bring March 8 and March 14 leaders together for a joint meeting. Maybe in a joint meeting, he would be able to achieve the breakthrough that has eluded him so far.

¶9. (C) Moussa said that Michel Aoun and Hassan Nasrallah had both proposed that he chair a "bilateral" meeting between Aoun and Saad Hariri. This, Moussa thought, made sense: with him mediating, there was more hope for progress than if Hariri and Aoun met again without outside facilitation. The Ambassador, noting he was giving his own view rather than reflecting any Washington decision, responded that a Hariri-Aoun meeting seemed to be a very bad idea. Aoun would benefit, while Hariri would end up with problems with his own Christian allies. Aoun postures as the only Christian political interlocutor, an impression which, while not accurate, would be reinforced by such a meeting. Moreover, Aoun would likely not be satisfied with Hariri's answers and thus cite the meeting in refusing to go along with electing Sleiman. Finally, Michel Sleiman is likely to take some offense to playing up Aoun. In fact, the Ambassador said, that Hizballah is insisting on Aoun as the primary negotiating channel suggests that Hizballah simply doesn't want a solution of any kind.

¶10. (C) Moussa disagreed. Flattering Aoun is perhaps the only chance to move him to play a more constructive role. Aoun hasn't yet given up his presidential ambitions, and allowing him to feel that he is the kingmaker is "the least" we can do. Besides, for Hizballah, Aoun is now of strategic importance, so Hizballah is unlikely to back down in its demands for a Hariri-Aoun meeting. It is better to give in to Hizballah on what is merely a cosmetic issue. (We heard from Saad Hariri several hours later on 1/12 that Moussa was still pushing him on the idea, which Saad is thus far rejecting. "Can you get Saudi Arabia to tell Moussa no?" he

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asked by phone, to which we responded that he had his own channels to Saudi Arabia.) Clearly wanting to move on, Moussa said that, if March 14 continued to reject a Hariri-Aoun meeting, well then maybe he could convene all fourteen participants of the spring 2006 National Dialogue. The Ambassador noted that even that could be problematic, if there was insufficient chances for a break-through: a failed National Dialogue session could tempt people to move to the street.

¶11. (C) The Ambassador asked Moussa what he expected the Arab League foreign ministers to do in their next meeting on January 27, should there be no Lebanese president by then. "It's too early to say," Moussa responded.

CHATAH: MOUSSA TO GO TO DAMASCUS

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¶12. (C) The Ambassador then stopped by the Grand Serail for a post-breakfast chat with Mohamad Chatah, senior advisor to PM Siniora. Chatah verified that Moussa had shared a similar read-out with Siniora the previous night. But he provided an additional detail: Moussa said that, when next in Beirut, he would make a day trip to Damascus, to participate in a cultural forum. Chatah characterized this as a terrible

idea, as one that would give the impression that one had to go to Damascus for decisions regarding domestic Lebanese politics. Speaking to the Ambassador separately, Minister Marwan Hamadeh did not fully agree with Chatah: while Hamadeh wished everyone would simply ignore Damascus, he thought that, if Moussa insisted on going, it might end up being useful, since he would undoubtedly come back empty-handed, thus exposing Syria for being unhelpful. While Syria would pretend that Lebanon's problems were domestic in origin, Moussa and the world would know that Syria is blocking the presidency.

COMMENT

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¶13. (C) So far, with Moussa apparently leaving Beirut today (1/12) empty-handed, there is nothing tangible to show for the Arab League foreign ministers' communique of a week ago. Moussa's diplomacy gave Parliament Speaker Berri the excuse to postpone presidential elections again (for the 12th time), from 1/12 to 1/21. But, even without Moussa's presence, it is certain that Berri would have delayed the session. In general, there was neither harm nor gain to Moussa's presence in Beirut this week. But we hope he does not continue to push for a Aoun-Hariri meeting, which seems to us to be a losing proposition for March 14 and a gain for Aoun.

¶14. (C) Perhaps, however, March 14 leaders could turn this Moussa yearning for such a meeting to their advantage: since the opposition insists that Aoun is their interlocutor with the March 14 majority, then March 14 could pick someone besides Hariri to be their interlocutor with the March 8-Aoun forces. Just because Hariri was authorized to speak for the majority with Berri, he does not have to be the interlocutor for discussions with Aoun. How different the picture would be, for example, if Moussa were to chair a meeting between Aoun, representing the minority, and Samir Geagea, representing the majority. Aoun could not use such a session to claim that he is the Christian equivalent to Hariri. In that case, we expect that Aoun, not March 14, would be the one to say no and appear to be unreasonable.

FELTMAN